

Honor the Earth: Sacred Tobacco

Posted on **February 3, 2014**

“Traditional tobacco in American Indian communities is considered a sacred gift that is used for spiritual, cultural and ceremonial use and it ensures the continuity of their way of life.” ~ CoCo “fresh” Villaluz LRI-Tobacco Prevention

Neary: On today’s program we hear from Anishinaabe Kwe Ponoka Walker about how to cultivate, offer, and pray with sacred tobacco. Tobacco is a plant spirit. Sacred tobacco is known as asemaa and is used only for prayer. Do not be fooled by the consumer ads that make all tobacco look the same. In reality tobacco is a diverse plant family native to Turtle Island or North America. For instance, Ponoka Walker cultivates pink, white, and blue species of asemaa. Tobacco is the Elder plant spirit that needs to be respected and honored for having an important role in upholding the plant nation. Ponoka Walker talks about how the fate of asemaa also has an important role in representing the destiny of the Anishinaabe or Ojibwe peoples of the Great Lakes Region.

Listen to Honor the Earth: Asemaa (Sacred Tobacco) here: <https://soundcloud.com/honorthearth/honor-the-earth-asemaa-sacred>

Ironically, asemaa first found Ponoka Walker when she and her family moved to Monroe, Michigan, known as “Custer’s Town,” home of the Longhair General George Armstrong Custer. The sacred tobacco plant was first gifted to her. Once Ponoka Walker showed she could care for the gifted asemaa, undomesticated species of the plant began to find her and tell her their names in dream. People that grow tobacco traditionally have the stories with the instructions on when to plant, when to harvest, and how to harvest and store the sacred plant. Ponoka Walker gives specific instructions for how properly care for the sacred tobacco, such as not getting its “feet wet” when the plant is a seedling. Not getting the tobacco’s “feet wet” means the plant must be misted in a tray of gravel and soil so the roots do not drown, which is how the plant grows in nature.

Tobacco is medicine. Ponoka Walker talks story about how asemaa led her to Midewiwin or Grand Medicine Lodge, where people were mostly using processed commercial tobacco. Her gifts of asemaa have been guiding the people back to the way their ancestors communicated with the spirit of tobacco. After all, tobacco is a link to communicate with the spirit world and Creation. There are many forms of communicating with tobacco. Tobacco can be smoked in a ceremonial pipe, and Ponoka Walker has gifted some asemaa to pipe carriers for prayer. Tobacco can be burned as an offering, but tobacco is not always burnt. Ponoka Walker only uses the asemaa she grows for prayers on the land and tobacco ties.

Some more knowledge to keep in mind is that tobacco is always given as an offering to a spirit of an animal or plant for giving its life to us to live. Tobacco is always given to the mother for using her gifts. Tobacco can also be a gift to an elder as a gift or when requesting their assistance or advice. Tobacco can be given to a friend or to a stranger when offering a hand of peace. Finally, tobacco is never to be abused. Now let us hear from Ponoka Walker, explaining the journey she has traveled with asemaa to Winona LaDuke.

LaDuke: Hello this is Winona LaDuke. I’ve wandered out to Michigan and I’ve met this really cool lady. Tell me your name again.

Walker: My name is Ponoka Walker.

LaDuke: Ponoka Walker. I’ve never heard that name before. That’s a nice name.

Walker: It was a birth name from my mother, was Janice Larene. That was my Grandmother’s name was Janet Larene, and my mother didn’t like the name Janet. She thought it sounded too harsh. And then the name Ponoka was given to me by an elder from a dream that I had. It was an interpretation through a dream. And so the name Ponoka is just part of the name, and it literally translates to the word elk in the Abenaki language. And that’s what I am, a Deer Clan person. So the elk is part of that clan. So the name extends from the dream that I had. A

few years back I had that added into my name. So it's part of my legal name now. It's what I resonate with because it's what the Spirit calls me to be.

LaDuke: Ponoka, a nice name. So I met you today. You gave me some really nice gifts of some cedar, and some sage, some sweetgrass, and some asemaa. So I really want to ask you about the asemaa. That's a special plant, and you grow it.

Walker: That's right I do. Yeah. So the way that that happened was by chance. When I first came to Michigan, we were in a state of trying to figure out where we're at. We didn't know anyone here when we came to Monroe. That's where I live. I live in the town of Monroe. They call it Custer's town.

LaDuke: That's where Custer's from, right? Isn't there a big statue of Custer in that town? This is General Custer we're talking about.

Walker: Yeah, there's a big statue in that town for him. That's exactly right: General Custer. And the story is when he was ten years old he was sent there because he wouldn't behave well in Ohio where he was originally from, born and raised. So he was sent to Michigan and spend time with his Auntie to help her out because of the way he was. And then he spent the rest of his life there. He and his wife were married in the church downtown there and some of his relatives were buried in a graveyard there, so they call it Custer's town, a big wing-ding thing.

But anyways when we first moved to town, we saw that big statue: Custer. And my daughter's know something about Native culture. We've been walking Red Road for quite a while, so I drove them around the town and showed them where they're going to school. And my youngest daughter Chelsea was in the fifth-grade, and she said to me: Momma, why would they name a school after a pudding? Because the school was called Custer Elementary, named after the general, but she thought it was named after a custard pie or pudding.

LaDuke: You probably just should have stuck to Custer is pudding.

Walker: I told her that. I said honey you've got to name something after something, so really maybe he's just a puddin' head, but anyways I thought that was really cute. Out of the mouth of a babe, why would you name a school after a pudding? Anyways, we now make Monroe our home. My first job, so to speak, I worked at a floral shop and I did floral arrangements. And there was a man there, his name was Richard Stillgrave. He was Dutch and he was the second generation of that place, but he was really drawn to plants. And he knew that I was drawn to plants, and he knew that I walked a spiritual path. So he decided that he'd like to gift me with this plant. And he told me all about it. And it was a tobacco plant, the old kind from the Cherokee land that was tall with pink flowers. For a couple years I grew that plant, but it didn't resonate with me so much because, you know, I knew there was something more to that.

I had dreams of the plants coming to the land. And I spread asemaa all over the land. We have fourteen acres we take care of here. I don't like to use that word ownership, but we do take care of that land. And so I prayed to the plants to speak loud to me, so I could relearn the things and they could teach me. So I spread that pink asemaa tobacco there.

LaDuke: And for those of you who don't know, tobacco seeds are really, really, really small.

Walker: Yeah, really tiny. So the pod of the tobacco seed is about the size of a pea. And inside that pod is about five hundred-plus little seeds, teeny tiny seeds, so little you can hardly see them. So he gave them to me. So that was my first encounter with tobacco, growing it. And it grew lovely. Some years later, we decided we wanted a dog. So we went to Kentucky to get this dog, and the person who raised the dogs there, her name is Willow, she's a Red healer. He was also a tobacco farmer, and so there it was again – the tobacco. Why does tobacco keep coming into my life? I wasn't really sure, but there it was again. So he took us out to the field. It was in November and they were harvesting it. The barn was full of tobacco, and he gave us some seeds. He told us about how he raised that tobacco and the way that he did for commercial use. It didn't feel quite right. He told us: You put it in the freezer, freeze it, da da da da.

I still had these dreams about tobacco, and out of the window came white tobacco, the wild tobacco: beautiful white flowers. It was all over the land. There it was. Everywhere you looked, it was there. So I took those seeds and I put them around our ceremonial space because I wanted that asemaa close to me.

LaDuke: So is this three different kinds of tobacco we're talking about? So we have the pink tobacco from the Cherokees, we have the tobacco from Kentucky, which is yellow?

Walker: It's pink, but it's a different kind.

LaDuke: And then this white flower tobacco appeared.

Walker: It's a white tobacco. It's a natural tobacco. It's wild. I don't know the botanical name of it, but it's beautiful. It has a tiny little pod on the back and then the flower opens up flat, almost like a wild flax. Then that plant appeared right outside the windows of the house around other places in the garden. It just came up on its own.

I have a friend who walks Red Road. His name is Mike Noble, and he knows a woman from Walpole Island. They've been friends for a long time. She gifted him seven tobacco plants, and he didn't do so very well with them. They died, actually all but maybe one, and he said I know you can take care of this plant. This plant needs to be with you, not me. Obviously, I'm not doing things right. So he gifted me that plant from the woman. She was from the Pigeon family, actually, and he gifted me that one plant that was left and a handful of seeds.

So I had learned an asemaa song over the years, and I sang that song to that plant and I fed it the white tobacco, the asemaa that I had. Because I had learned along the way that asemaa plants like to be where other asemaa is, where other tobacco is. They like that, and so I fed it that. I also had water that I prayed with through the full moon, doing moon ceremonies. So I sang to that water and I fed that plant that water from there. It thrived.

It was pretty close to the end of the season, so at the end of the season I saved the seeds from that plant. And then in the early wintertime, February, then we planted those seeds again in a little pot in our house. It was built by an Italian family, so we have two kitchens. And the bottom kitchen has windows all over it, so we took it to the bottom kitchen and we planted them in little pods by the window where they could get the lighting. We learned that you water them in a tray from the bottom up, not from the top down because you don't want the roots soft. You don't want their feet wet. You put them on a tray, then you water the tray, then you soak the water up that way, so they can get the amount of water they need.

LaDuke: What are you saying? So you're saying they don't like their feet wet. How do you water them?

Walker: When they're little you put the pod in a tray with little gravel stones in it, then you fill that tray with water so that pot soaks the water from the bottom up like it would naturally get the water. And then you mist it, you just keep it misted on the top.

LaDuke: So you put soil on top of the gravel, which is where you put the seed, the itty bitty seed.

Walker: Then when they come up they're tiny, and they're all so close together that you feed the plants themselves. So you tell the other plants around the big plant that they're going to be helpers, that they're going to give the gift of life to the big plant and push in the little ones around the big ones, and it grows taller from that. When they grow, there's always some that grow stronger than the rest, so you push the ones that probably weren't going to make it anyways into the soil, and they feed the ones that will survive.

When it gets warmer towards March and April, then you harden the plant by bringing it outside in the warmth and back in during the evening. And we did that until the time was right to plant them outside. Then when it was time to plant them, my husband, whose name is Deer Walker, Walks among the Deer, and our two daughters, we did it ceremonially. We prepared the space for them outside. We dug little holes. The girls sang water songs and poured the water into the hole. We fed each hole with asemaa, with natural tobacco, the pink that we had. And then we planted the plants in there, and we sang them that tobacco song, so that they knew something sacred was coming to this place in the Earth. We watered them, and they thrived. They thrived beautiful.

If you want there to be more leaf, then you pinch off the flowers, and the leaf grows larger. Each of the leaves has its own purpose. The leaves that are smaller, closer to the earth, those are for children. Those are the ones you pray for children's issues because those leaves are milder. And as you go up the plant, then the leaves become smaller and stronger. So each one of the leaves has its own purpose for who you pray for when you're

praying, when you're doing those ceremonies for those people who carry Opwaaganag – pipes – do those ceremonies. So then you harvest those leaves out in particular ways with that intention for a pipe carrier or a medicine person, but that year the plant just wanted to make flowers. It didn't matter how much we pinched them back. They would shoot out from the sides. More and more would come out from there.

LaDuke: So they wanted to make more seeds.

Walker: We ended up with so much seed; it was unbelievable, and we did end up with a beautiful harvest too. So that was year one. From thereon, we found that after about three or four years of doing this this way that wherever the plant had been before the seed was falling down on the ground, and it was feeding itself. So we no longer needed to go through that toiling way of putting the seed into the pots and watering and hardening them and coming in and out. Each spring, the gift of asemaa was there waiting for us, for the spring.

LaDuke: So it perennialized?

Walker: It did. It perennialized itself. Not only that, I'm a wild crafter so while I was gathering herbs, there was this plant that was calling to me. And I thought: Why is this plant calling me so much? I went over and looked. It was this beautiful, beautiful blue plant, and I didn't know its name. So I sat down there with it. I said: I don't know your name. I don't know why you're coming to me. It came to me in dream, and told me its name. When I found out what the plant was, it was also a tobacco plant. So it was a blue tobacco. Now on the land we had pink tobacco from the Cherokee people, and we had this white tobacco that had appeared by itself, and we had this beautiful yellow-green tobacco that came from the gift of the seed from Walpole Island, and now we have this beautiful blue lobelia plant which is a very, very strong tobacco plant.

We've had this beautiful relationship with asemaa, and it's been so rewarding. It's taught us so much and made a real connection to the Earth for us. To be able to wake up in the morning at that time of the false dawn and know that a new day is coming, to hold that in your hand, which you have a purpose to which you have a connection to, that has taught you so much, that is now part of your own spirit. To hold that in your hand, to greet the day, to know that you can see the grandfather, and say here I am. I'm ready to do my work. I have my bundle to do what it is that I'm called to do. What is it that I'm called to do?

It was a deep, really deep connection, so deep that I can't explain to you how it was. We only use that asemaa for prayers on the Earth. We don't use that in an Opwaagan or pipe. The teaching that I learned from the plant is that it takes a long time for it to become ready for it to be used that way. It has to sit and wait to have prayer made to it. You don't just rush out and grab that leaf and dry it out and crumble it up and use it. You have to have purpose like everything else. You know, what is the intention? Think about that then when the time is right, we would gift that out to different pipe carriers, so that they could use it. In our personal bundles we use shashasha. We don't use the natural asemaa. We use that for prayers on Earth, making prayer ties and prayer bundles. So we did it a little different that way.

LaDuke: I don't know what shashasha is.

Walker: Shashasha is the natural tobacco, some people say, made from the red willow plant. The teaching that we have from our medicine helpers is that there's a particular time of the year when the shashasha is gathered. You have to do it before the Thunder Beings come back, and you have to do it in reverence in the fall before the Thunder Beings go silent. Then you have to pray to them and tell them that is what you're intending to do. And they will guide you to the right plants that you can use for the medicine for that, but you have to do it at a particular time in a prayerful way. That's what we personally use in our pipe bundles is the shashasha, the red willow.

LaDuke: Shashasha. And then you use the asemaa for your prayers on the ground?

Walker: Yeah, and with the asemaa each year when we harvest it, then a little bit of the seed would get into the leafing, the dried leafing. When we gifted those dry leaves to people to pray with, they would make their petitions and place them onto the Earth. Then they were casting out seeds. So in different places that asemaa would grow again, and it would be re-introducing itself into the areas. That was just the beginning of that journey with that asemaa. I knew there was some reason for it coming to me, but I didn't know what it was. At

that stage I did not have a clue, except for the richness that I had with the asemaa and the Earth, how it enriched that for me between the plant nation and my own personal walk.

The plant nation became more vibrant to me. They appeared to me in dreams. They would tell me their names in my dreams, and when people would need something, the plant would appear. That was something else that came from that asemaa.

Sometime later I was introduced to a person through our Midewin ceremonies, and when I was there at this ceremony, they were using commercial tobacco for all their work. They would pass it around, and it would be little blue can Bugler and your American spirits. They would use American Spirits and those other kinds of commercial tobaccos, and I thought that was pretty wild how they would do that. So I offered asemaa to the Grand Chief for the things he would be sharing and the knowledge that he would be giving to the people. He saw that the gift that I gave him was natural asemaa. He liked that very much, and he asked me: Where did I get that natural asemaa from? I told him that we grew it on the land that we cared for. He nodded and called over this man. The man came and looked at it, and he touched it, and he smelled it, and looked at it, and he nodded. He shook his head and said yes, that this was natural asemaa. And they kind of drawn by that, by who is this mysterious woman who has come into their lodge with this asemaa?

After several visits there, he mentioned one time in the ceremony that he wanted everybody to go back to the natural asemaa, and I thought: Wow, I can help with that. That is something I can help with because we've been growing it for quite a few years now, and our plants were thriving really well. So my husband and I prepared over a hundred plants, gifts of seed and asemaa, and we took it to give to the people. But things don't always turn out beautiful in storyland. Sometimes things are mistaken and people don't understand intentions or maybe they're fearful. At the beginning of this I told you my spirit name, but what I didn't tell you is that I'm from mixed descent. I'm not tribally enrolled, and for some people that's a big issue, but my heart is true to that.

I knew ever since I was a young child that I was an Indian girl. I knew that, and for whatever reason my Grandmother chose not to share those things with us, but we were raised up in that traditional way without ceremonies. We sugar bushed. My Father taught us how to sugar bush, and he taught us how to log. We went into the woods and logged, and he taught us medicine plants. My brother and I harvested roots, and when we were sick, we went to the woods. He would bring back things and take care of us that way. So I never really had that issue with being tribal or non-tribal, and I never knew that concept until I moved to Michigan. That was so completely different about the tribal thing. I just knew that I was an Indian, and that was good enough. I knew that I knew the ways of the land, and that was good enough.

But for whatever reason there at that place it wasn't quite good enough for everyone, and there were arrows shot at me about who are you? Why are you here? What tribe are you from? Who brought you? And all these questions and harsh words from one particular grandmother there to the point where I was questioning myself. Where do I belong? Who am I? If I have to belong to a tribe and I'm not tribally enrolled, then who am I? Am I not a Native person? Who am I? If this is what I've always been all my life and now I'm told that I'm not because I'm not tribally enrolled, then who am I? What am I? Those arrows hurt so much that I left.

I left that Mide ceremony, and I went to where it was comfortable for me. I went to where they had the spring ceremonies, where I had helped so much, where I had gathered the ferns, where I brought those gifts in, and where I stood on the tops there with the thunder all around me and helped bring in that beautiful lodge. And I thought: I came to do something. I came to do this work, and I'm going to do that first. Then I'm going to leave, but I'm going to finish what I came for. So in the morning when I came back, I didn't go to the morning ceremonies. I didn't go to the water ceremonies. I didn't go to the strawberry ceremonies. I didn't feel like I belonged in that lodge anymore, so I didn't go.

Then there was this really weird thing that happened, there was a woman that was looking for me. She said: Ponoka where are you? Are you in here? And she was knocking on the port-a-janes over and over again, calling out my name. She said: Ponoka are you in here? The Grand Chief is looking for you. I thought: Why does he want me? Oh no, I must be really in trouble. Someone must have told him about what happened last night, but I went in the lodge anyways.

Before I went in, one of the water walkers Josephine said to me: What is wrong with you? Why are you crying? And why are you so upset? So I told her about what happened, and I told her my intention was not to stay but to leave. She said something to me that was really beautiful and has helped me along my way, guided me along the way. She said: It doesn't matter who introduces you to Red Road. It doesn't matter who introduces you to ceremony. It doesn't matter whose car you ride in, but what matters is that the Spirit brought you here for a purpose, and if you leave before you fulfill the purpose that the Spirit has called you to do, then you have closed the door on that spirit.

She also shared with me that teaching that in the Sky World we're all given a gift by the Creator Gichi Manidoo, and when we come to this place – this realm – we have that gift – that gift the Creator has given us to do. Somewhere along the line we become less Spirit and more human, and as we become more human we forget. We forget what it is we are meant to do. So we struggle along the way, stumbling here and there, trying to figure out what it is we're supposed to do. Sometimes along the way we figure it out, and sometimes we continue stumbling. She brought that to my Eye to see: It didn't matter who brought me. What mattered was that the Creator had brought me here for a work, some work. There was a gift that I had to share.

So I went into that Mide ceremony, and the lodge was full! It was springtime. It was packed – 500 people. Packed! I was thinking: Oh my gosh, there's so many people in here, and they call me to the front to the center fire. He said: This woman came to a storytelling that I was doing, and she was the only woman out of this whole room of a couple hundred people who offered me asemaa for the story that I was sharing that day. And he said: When she told me that, she told me that her people had lost their memory, and they no longer knew who they were. They were struggling to try and remember who they were, who their people were. Where did they come from? They didn't know those things, and she gave me asemaa to help remember those things. Now here she is again in my lodge. She has brought us a gift. I want her to tell us about that gift that she's brought. She's brought these jars of herbal jams and things, but she's brought us something more special than that. I want her to tell us about that.

The gift that I brought to the people was the gift of asemaa. He had asked the people to bring natural asemaa into the lodge, to find a way to bring that back. I was gifted those seeds so many years ago, not knowing quite why those seeds were given to me to care for them, to nurture them. Why was the asemaa, the natural tobacco, coming to me in so many ways? Why was that happening? I don't know, but on this day, with all the things that led up to this and with my heart being torn from my chest, wondering who I am and where I belong, I stood in front of these people. So I did the best that I could to introduce myself in the language, and to say that I only knew a little of the language, to apologize, to make that apology to the Spirits to speak in that foreign language of English because I didn't know enough of the language to speak that way. And I told them briefly about the story of how the seed came to me and how I heard that story from the Grand Chief that they wanted the asemaa plants brought. I could do that! I could do that much.

So I brought those seeds to the people. I brought them over a hundred plants and I brought them gifts of the seeds of asemaa, and what I brought also was the knowledge of how to raise it up in a good way, more than just an agricultural plant that you get at the greenhouse, but to do it in a spiritual way – The way the plant had taught me to grow it, to respect it, to be careful who you give it to, to know that whatever you're doing with it there comes consequences and responsibility that. There were sometimes people who would say: You know, I'm running out of that roll stuff. I'd really like to have some. I want to roll it up. Can you give me some? And I'd

have to tell them no, I cannot do that because that's one reason why we have such an addiction to tobacco because it was taken out of context. The tobacco is a gift for ceremonial reason, for a petition to plants, to pray to the Creator, to pray for something. It wasn't meant to be inhaled, you know? That's not what the purpose of it was. So it's been taken away from its roots. I can't say that everybody I've given it to hasn't smoked it. It's out of my hands, but those people who asked me for it directly for that reason, then I would decline to do that.

So I told them about that, about the plant, how to raise it the best way that I could. And while I had 500 people there, I told them one more thing. I told them about what happened to me the night before. I told them how I felt that I didn't belong anywhere. I told them about how arrows were shot at me. I told them how I almost left, but the Spirit called me back. It was really hard to stand there and to share that part of the journey with those people, to know that sometimes ego and fear gets in the way of spiritual things – That you don't have to be part of a society to be gifted something to help the people – That ordinary people can sometimes do extraordinary things – That ordinary people can help the people heal – That ordinary people walk the Red Road every day and do it in a good way – That ordinary people petition each morning when the sun comes up to say: The Grandfather is here. I am here to do the work that you've called me to do – That my Spirit is waking up. Show me what it is that I am to do.

LaDuke: Mii-gwetch. Thank you for your story. That is a very beautiful story Ponoka. Thanks for being really cool with your asemaa. It's a really good story.

Walker: Mii-gwetch. It's a beautiful gift, and the more we share it, the more the beauty comes, the more the beauty is. I still don't know quite what it is I'm supposed to do with my life, but I'm sure in time those things will unfold.

Featured Music:

Coyote Jump – “Prayer Taking Flight”

Okimaskwesis – “Peace Pipe Passing”

Photo Credit:

Indian Country Today Media Network

How to grow your own tobacco by Ponoka Walker:

“We learned that you water them in a tray from the bottom up, not from the top down because you don't want the roots soft. You don't want their feet wet. You put them on a tray, then you water the tray, then you soak the water up that way so they can get the amount of water they need. When they're little you put the pod in a tray with little gravel stones in it, then you fill that tray with water so that pot soaks the water from the bottom up like it would naturally get the water. And then you mist it, you just keep it misted on the top.

Then when they come up they're tiny, and they're all so close together that you feed the plants themselves. So you tell the other plants around the big plant that they're going to be helpers, that they're going to give the gift of life to the big plant and push in the little ones around the big ones, and it grows taller from that. When they grow, there's always some that grow stronger than the rest. So you push the ones that probably weren't going to make it anyways into the soil, and they feed the ones that will survive.”

– Ponoka Walker